

5-2009

FULFILLMENT

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FULFILLMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Stacey Morgan Brown
May 2009

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Dr. Donna Winchell
Michael LeMahieu

INTRODUCTION

For weeks I was “writing my thesis” without actually writing much of anything. But I had a manila folder labeled “Thesis” into which I would stuff scraps of research and random ideas. And I started a number of sketches that began collecting in often-opened but rarely modified files on my computer. So I felt I could at least say I was “writing my thesis” to anyone who asked how my graduate studies were coming along. It’s not that I didn’t have any ideas but rather I had too many. When I had considered writing an analytical thesis, I felt limited by my own attention span (eighty pages of analysis?). But when I decided to write a creative thesis (a decision that simultaneously made my stomach churn and my heart leap), the door was suddenly wide open. I couldn’t read something, see something, hear something without it causing a ripple in my imagination.

The first significant flash of inspiration occurred while I was reading some short stories for a postmodern fiction class: Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” Barthelme’s “Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning,” and Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse.” In both the Borges and Barthelme stories, I was struck most forcefully by the manipulation of the reader. Borges, in particular, had written a story that sounds like nonfiction, that structurally seems like nonfiction, but is actually fiction. He includes research, cites sources, provides quotes, even includes footnotes—all of which Borges fabricated. Barthelme’s story has a similar effect in that it appears to be a collection of anecdotes about a real person, Robert Kennedy. But it is just the suggestion of the title that elicits the belief of the reader because the character in the anecdotes is only called “K.” Like Borges, Barthelme includes interviews and quotes that create a very three-

dimensional character, but he is still just that—a character. What’s so impressive is that both stories seem *real*—like nonfiction, and yet they are not; they are fiction in the guise of nonfiction, or “fictional nonfiction.” Barth’s story, “Lost in the Funhouse,” presents another intriguing manipulation of the reader in that it constantly reminds readers that it is, in fact, a story. Where Borges and Barthelme suggest their stories are real, Barth insists that his isn’t. It is a self-conscious work, acknowledging its own use of literary conventions like italics, point of view, and plot elements. Barth uses the techniques of autobiographies, of nonfiction, while at the same time forcing the reader to accept it as a piece of fiction.

In writing “Fulfillment,” I want readers to question if it is a true story (like Borges and Barthelme) and to question if it is *my* story, if it is autobiographical (like Barth). Initially, I planned on writing a story that felt much more like biography, and I channeled my inner Borges and Barthelme, coming up with ideas like writing the fictional biography of a literary critic. And, for awhile, my thesis did only revolve around the central character; it was strictly third person. Eventually, however, my narrator wanted a voice in the story (I realized I was writing with someone’s voice and began to imagine who that person would be), and so the story became first-person. Despite shifting to a first person narrator, I still intended for her to have a relatively small “part” in comparison to the central character, Del. I imagined the story taking shape like Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which features a first-person narrator used so sparingly that the novel reads like a third-person account. What I also hoped to accomplish, like Vonnegut, was having a narrator who could objectively present the very surreal

experiences of the central character, which aids the reader in suspending his or her disbelief while reading about Billy Pilgrim and Tralfamadore, or in my case about Del and Tess, a fictional character, or Del and the narrator.

Another characteristic that enables the suspension of disbelief in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the narrator's constant reminders that the story is real. The first page testifies that "All this happened, more or less," and emphasizes that the narrator "really did" do the things he's about to relate (Vonnegut 1). Borges does the same in his short story "The Book of Sand" when he writes, "To claim that it is true is nowadays the convention of every made up story. Mine, however, *is* true." Having the first-person narrator in "Fulfillment" allowed me to subliminally incorporate some of that same insistence; it is a "true story." I say "subliminally" because the narrator never asserts that it is "true" (earlier versions she did). Instead of telling readers this story is "true," I want them to wonder if it is, which begs the questions "What is a true story?"

Were I solely influenced by Borges, "Fulfillment" might only have been a story that appears to be true, one that seems factual, that is teeming with "factual" evidence. However, when I consider "Fulfillment" a "true" story, I can't neglect the definition of the word I gleaned from Tim O'Brien. In his collection *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien writes, "a true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (78). My story isn't a war story, of course, but his words illustrate the definition of a True story (if you will), and that is a story that expresses some Truth, some insight into the human condition. To do this, a story doesn't have to be "true"; it doesn't have to be factual; instead it needs to be felt—a reader should be able "to feel the truth, to believe by the raw

force of feeling” because “a thing may happen and be a total lie; and another may not happen and be truer than the truth” (O’Brien 74, 83). Eventually, I saw “Fulfillment” drift towards this definition; readers may question if it is true/factual/autobiographical, but what I really want them to consider is the truth in the possibility of someone like Del or the narrator; I want them to consider the truth of love. And I want readers to believe the story—to believe in the story—because of the strength of their feeling, because of the strength of the characters’ feelings, because of the undeniable reality embedded in the fiction.

That strength of the characters and their feelings is what makes “Fulfillment” real. Readers may wonder if it’s “a real story,” and my answer is that it is real to the characters, so, yes, it is a real story. Furthermore, it is a real possibility that they *could* exist. Do they actually exist? No. But that’s a different question. To illustrate my point, I again call on *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Does it detract from the reality of the book that Billy Pilgrim is unstuck in time? Billy Pilgrim’s condition may not *exist*, but by the strength of the story, the narration, the character of Billy Pilgrim, readers *believe*. Just as readers must believe in Billy Pilgrim’s delusions, they must believe in Del’s...and the narrator’s.

Deciding to make the central conflict a matter of delusional “real” people loving fictional characters inevitably produced some narrative difficulties, but the idea had me hooked. It took shape under the influence of three very dissimilar texts: Stephenie Meyer’s comments on her *Twilight* series, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and the film *Lars and the Real Girl*. Having read *Twilight*, an immensely popular teen novel that features the romance between a teenage girl and her modern-day vampire boyfriend, I was curious

about the author. Browsing through her comments on the series, I was surprised at her mention that she was “in love with” Edward “from day one” (Meyer). (Edward is the eternal seventeen-year-old, who is modeled as a perfect man—gloriously good-looking, smart, cultured, sensitive, etc.) And though I couldn’t find the instance again, I’m sure she even called him “my Edward.” Regardless, I know I had the distinct impression of love and possessiveness towards her male character, and that whole dynamic between author and character reminded me of a passage I had read in the introduction to my copy of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*:

There is one moment when Hardy seems to forget that Tess is a character in his own fiction and begins to talk about her like an old love, whom he has lost but cannot forget...It is...like a ghostly visitation, as though Tess herself had stepped into the room where he was writing and was standing suddenly at his side.... (Alvarez 22)

Then, according to the back cover, “Tess is Hardy’s most striking and tragic heroine and the character who meant most to him,” which Alvarez reiterates in his introduction, calling her “the heroine whom he created and then, unwillingly, destroyed” (22). (I can directly attribute my own obsession with Tess to these comments; part of her magic is the spell she cast on her creator.) So what connection is there between authors and their characters? Could someone, including an author, really love a *character*? I searched the web for “in love with a fictional character” and was shocked to discover so many message boards where people have asserted that they’re in love with a character from a book or have even asked for advice because their obvious predicament is interfering with real relationships. I didn’t doubt their obsession, but I did doubt their “love” because they were still able to recognize that the characters were, in fact, fictional. So what

would it mean if they didn't think the characters were fictional? If they thought the characters were real? Add the influence of *Lars and the Real Girl*.

Lars and the Real Girl is a 2007 film written by Nancy Oliver. It tells the story of a man (Lars) who lives a rather isolated life until he introduces his girlfriend to his brother and sister-in-law. His girlfriend is a life-size doll. Under a psychiatrist's urging, the brother and his wife, and eventually the whole community, play along with Lars' delusion, providing a very real life for the doll. While, in my story, Del's delusion isn't public like Lars' (and Lars has a tangible object at the center of his delusion), this movie did get me thinking about the power of delusion. By definition, delusions are "unshakeable beliefs in something untrue," and the person "cannot tell what is real from what is imagined" ("Mental Health"). Most interesting to me is that delusions generally "involve situations that could occur in real life" and that people "with delusional disorder often can continue to socialize and function normally, apart from the subject of their delusion, and generally do not behave in an obviously odd or bizarre manner" ("Mental Health"). Del's psychosis was born (as was his name). It is perfectly plausible that someone he loves could die and that he would grieve for that person, and that he would feel guilty for getting involved with other women. Those are all normal, rational circumstances. The delusion is simply that the object of his affection is not real. (Likewise, the narrator loses touch with reality; however, medically, she more likely suffers from depression and hallucinations.) In his article "Emotion and Fictional Beings," Zemach explains the condition of loving a fictional character (though not as a clinician but as an aesthetician). He contends that rational beings can have emotional

attachments to fictional characters because the truths about a character do occur in their “target-world” (43). A statement about the character, say about Tess’s attractiveness, is true “in the world(s) in which it is intended to be evaluated,” which is in the context of her novel (Zemach 43). Del has simply lost the ability to keep his emotions in context and eventually so does the narrator. (Zemach also mentions the theory of other writers that one doesn’t actually love the character but rather the characteristics, an idea I depicted with Del’s attraction to Skylar, who is modeled after Tess in her close relationship to her siblings, her “secret,” and “the freshness of her childhood lurking in her expression,” which is a direct allusion to Hardy’s description of Tess.)

By exploring an overlap between the worlds of fiction and reality, I follow in the wake of the many other writers who present a “permeable” line, done most often perhaps by Woody Allen. Any number of his films or stories undermine literary conventions (like fixed characters and plot structures). Of the works that I’ve seen and read, the film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and the short story “The Kugelmass Episode” had the most bearing on my work on “Fulfillment.” In *Purple Rose*, a character literally comes to life (or rather he *is* alive but decides to leave his film and enter the real world). Similarly, in “The Kugelmass Episode,” Kugelmass is able to enter the world of Madame Bovary, and then conversely Emma Bovary is able to leave her novel and enter present reality. I employ this same technique in “Fulfillment” when it is suggested that Del and the narrator are finally together in the narrator’s reality and then again in the epilogue when Del returns to Tess. So while Allen uses humor, and I use drama, we both break down the traditional boundaries of fiction. (The ambiguity of the scene with the narrator and

Del is perhaps vaguely reminiscent of Toni Morrison—think *Beloved*'s chapter of untagged dialogue—however, Morrison is more in line with magical realism whereas I would call “Fulfillment” “medical surrealism.”)

The unique trait of “Fulfillment” is that it is a simultaneously dual narrative. It is not a frame story; it is not two separate narratives—the two threads are strongest together, interlinked. I did start by composing two stories; first because I didn't have a major first-person narrator and second because I hadn't worked out how they would merge. When I finally braided the two strands together, it became apparent that they would inform each other. The narrator's actions only make sense because readers know what she has written, and what is written about Del is a result of what happens to the narrator; Del is the expression (and the manifestation) of the narrator's desires, and then gradually Del shapes the narrator's desires. The two became inseparable as stories and as characters in the story (which is why I include the excerpt from “Annabel Lee”; nothing can “ever dissever” the two) (Poe 81). A line that didn't make the final version of “Fulfillment” had the narrator saying, “His [Del's] story *is* my story,” which is the same sentiment—one does not exist without the other, narratives or characters. In regards to the characters, ultimately I couldn't bring myself to save both (because I don't see Del's as a happy ending). Consequently, each experiences fulfillment in union and independently, and fulfillment has a different meaning for each of them.

My goal, like my narrator's, was to write a love story, a love story where there is hope, loss, and triumph—and ambiguity. I wanted to write a story that would cause readers to rethink their definition of love stories and of love. I wanted to write a love

story that could be believed, that could be just unbelievable enough. “Fulfillment” is that story—“a tears and broken hearts and perseverance love story.”

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FULFILLMENT

In my dream, I was talking to a guy. It was night, and we were outside, but I couldn't tell you where. It was so dark, except for the moon. The guy—not anyone I knew—was crying, and I was trying to comfort him. But I didn't know how because he was crying over...a lost love, I guess you could say. In the dream, though, I knew he was crying over someone who wasn't *real*. And that's why I couldn't get him to stop crying. And I felt so helpless and moved, and I just wanted to wrap my arms around him to get him to stop. But then suddenly we were underwater. I don't know if it was supposed to be all the tears or what, but it was strange, then, because it was like I was watching things happen and not in it anymore. The *really* strange part is that it was like I was the guy, like I was watching myself from the outside. So I was watching him sink lower and lower, watching his shape disintegrate into the murky water, and he was reaching up, but there was nothing, there was no one, to grab on to. He was drowning. I was watching him drown. And I couldn't save him. Couldn't save me.

I woke up feeling keyed up, like I could still go back and try to save him. I lay very still just thinking about the strangeness of it all, willing myself to fall back asleep for a second look, a second chance. And the more awake I became, the more bizarre it all was. As the rational fingers of alertness reached into my head, I tried to make sense of his pain, of why he was crying, of the lingering ache of sympathy I felt.

It was love, I concluded, and I wanted to write. I didn't want to forget.

I got ready for work and drove into the office, still thinking about it. Just writing down the dream wouldn't be enough, but if I actually wrote a story around it, maybe I could save him. And so I decided to do it. Just on a whim. I mean, I hadn't *really*

written anything before, just the odd story or poem here and there, mostly just assignments in creative writing classes. It occurred to me that, as a love story, I had to write it because I didn't want it to be a happily-ever-after love story. No, I wanted it to be a true love story. A tears and broken hearts and perseverance love story.

I thought about the difference between obsession and delusion and which would be the burden of this man as I pulled up to the low, brick building where I worked and trolled for a parking spot. I was an assistant in the district office for a public school system, a job I'd had since graduating college. I liked it. I was involved in education without having to actually deal with kids. In one wing of the sprawling building, my desk was tucked into a little cube, one of four in the middle of an open area edged with real offices—you know, with doors and walls that go to the ceiling. In the other three cubes at the middle were Leah, Benji, and Ryan—other assistants of various titles. The four of us were all relatively young, so we ate lunch together, we poked our heads over the walls and spied on each other throughout the day, we knew the details of each other's personal lives. We were friends, I suppose, though our socializing never really extended beyond the workday. Well, almost never.

I was absently writing a list of names for my new main character when Ryan's head appeared over the cubicle wall. I felt my cheeks flush as I moved my arm over the list.

“How's it coming?” he asked.

My eyes widened. “What?”

“Your curriculum report?”

I blushed again. “Oh, fine. Just still waiting to get some surveys back from a couple middle schools.” I glanced at my empty computer screen and made a few deliberate mouse clicks while still obstructing view of the notepad underneath my arm.

“Ah, the delinquents. Well, you’re a smart girl. I’m sure Gwen will be impressed as always.” I rolled my eyes. He laughed, and I couldn’t help smiling and inwardly feeling flattered—an effect Ryan was very good at producing. He took a sip of his coffee while keeping his gaze leveled at me. I averted my eyes to my aimless scrolling on the computer screen. He went on, “So Benji wants to try a new Mexican place for lunch. That okay with you?”

“Lunch?” I looked up. “It’s not even 9:30.”

“Well, you know Benji.”

I thought of Benji’s large waistband. “True. Yeah, that’s fine with me. Check with Leah, though.”

“Leah-shmea. You call the shots.” I rolled my eyes again. He chuckled and wandered off.

I shifted my arm and looked at my list—Ethan, Oriel, Heath, Cliff, Jude, Edmund...Ryan? *Nah*, I thought. This man, my character, wouldn’t be like anyone I knew, and he wasn’t even like any of the literary namesakes I was considering. No, he was going to be special. He was going to be whatever I wanted him to be.

Carefully organized shelves of books reach far back into the recesses of the library. The varied colors and sizes of the bindings beckon to the hand of every reader like jars of candy to a child. It's electrifying—being surrounded by so many stories, so many worlds, so many voices, and anyone can conjure their quiet magic at no cost. An excellent idea.

Del is in the habit of letting his fingers trip over the spines as he weaves in and out of the stacks wheeling a book cart. He works in circulation, a job he doesn't need but keeps to be so constantly close to those magnetic stories. It's easy to picture him there—how he sneaks off to a quiet corner sometimes to read Dostoyevsky, slunk into the low nubby chairs, one hand knotted in his dark hair. Or how he perches on a stool behind the circulation counter, hunched over a book still, oblivious to the dumpy woman in front of him with her arms full of Danielle Steele and Maeve Binchy.

For him, it is essentially a soundless job, a deeply satisfying characteristic.

The ladies that share his daytime shift all think he's just the nicest boy, despite really knowing very little about him. And they worry about him. He's too quiet, too...remote. So even though he's twenty-seven (his library ladies are all sixty-plus), they hover and flutter over him with maternal concern, at which point he'll issue his slow smile and send Ruth's or Maxine's or Judy's heart skipping.

At the end of any given day, he can be seen tucking a few books under his arm and ducking through the wide glass doors with a small wave to the three pairs of spectacles watching him with a touch of pity. So on a damp day in September, there's nothing remarkable about him, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* at his side, heading towards the parking lot.

But he doesn't show up to work the next day, and he has never called in, let alone missed entirely. The ladies are immediately uneasy and pressure Perry, the clerk supervisor, to call him at home.

Del answers on the fourth ring. "Hello?" he says quietly.

"Hi, Del, it's Perry, and, uh, we're just wondering if you're coming in today. You're on the schedule."

There's a silence, and then Del says, "No. I'm not going to make it. I'm sorry."

"Oh. Are you ill?"

Another long pause. "No. There's been a death."

"Oh!" Perry coughs. "Oh. I'm sorry. Okay. Well, we'll get you covered, and see you in a few days." The last phrase was more question than statement.

"Yeah. Thanks, Perry." Del hangs up.

Perry replaces the phone in the cradle and turns to explain to the expectant trio and realizes he doesn't really have any information to tell them.

Three days later, Del walks up the wide stone steps to the library. He walks past the little café, past the circulation desk, straight to the employee work area. He's hanging up his coat when Ruth flutters into the room, accompanied by the tinkling of her eyeglass chain and cloud of floral perfume.

"Oh, Del, the girls and I are so very sorry." She clasps his hand with her cool, wrinkled one. "Maxine brought you a lasagna; it's in the fridge, and there's a chicken casserole from me." She

pats his hand. "You let us know if there's ever anything you need, okay?" She's still holding on to his hand. She gives it a squeeze and then retreats with a slight shake of her head.

Del sighs and goes to the fridge. His name is on two casserole dishes on the bottom shelf.

"Del?"

He stands up from behind the fridge door. It's Perry.

"Del, could I speak with you a minute?" Perry jerks his head toward his office. Del nods and follows him.

Seated in the tiny cube, Perry makes a show of straightening some papers before gesturing to the flimsy chair next to his metal desk.

"First, let me express my sincere sympathy." Del only nods, so Perry goes on, "Maybe it's not the best time, but I wanted to discuss something with you." He peers at Del through his large glasses. "How long have you worked here?"

"Uhm, about four years now."

"Do you like your job?"

"Yes. I like it very much."

"Do you see yourself making a career at the library?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"Good, good. What I'm getting at...what I want to let you know is that I consider you my number two." He waits for Del to say something, but he doesn't, so again he continues. "Do you think you could handle clerk supervisor duties should I ever...shall we say...move on to greener pastures?"

Del's eyebrows raise slightly, the first movement to flit across his face. "Uhm, wow. Thank you. It's definitely something I would consider."

"Good, good. Glad to hear it. Just want you to know you've got potential around here." He pauses. "And with that comes responsibility to always, uh, be your best."

"Of course. I appreciate the encouragement." Del's face is still emotionless.

"Alright!" Perry says awkwardly and stands.

Del stands, they shake hands, and Del leaves. A small, exasperated sigh escapes him while he wonders what other "pick-me-ups" his coworkers will have in store for him.

I sat on the couch, chewing my food slowly.

"You're kind of quiet tonight. Something wrong?"

I swallowed. "No," I said and smiled at Bill, my boyfriend, and kissed his cheek. He smiled back. I took another bite of pasta. We were eating dinner in front of the TV. After a moment, I said, "I did have this strange dream the other night, though, and it's been kind of sticking with me."

"About what?"

"Well, it sounds stupid...you know how when you try to explain a dream, it never makes as much sense as it did when you were actually dreaming it?"

"Yeah, so..."

"Okay. Well, there was this guy who was upset because his, like, girlfriend was dead, but she wasn't a real girlfriend—she was made up—but he *thought* she was real."

Bill wrinkled his forehead and eyed me carefully.

“See!” I laughed. “You can never explain dreams right. He was just so sad.” I frowned. “I felt sorry for him.” I was quiet for a minute and then added, “I think I may try and write a story about it.”

Bill looked over at me. “Really?”

“Is that lame? It’ll be a love story.”

“No way,” he said teasingly. He patted my leg. I swatted his hand.

“I just want to try it. Just for fun.”

“Go ahead.” He shrugged. “I remember you writing some stuff in college. It could be interesting.” He turned to look at me. “Not to me, you know,” he teased, “but whatever floats your boat. You can do it.”

Bill, my cheerleader. I leaned over and kissed him again.

A few nights later, I slid out of bed, glanced at Bill, who was staying over (as usual), and crept downstairs to where my computer was waiting. It was cooler downstairs, and I wished I’d put on slippers, but I wasn’t turning back now. The downstairs was so dark. I left it dark. I fumbled towards the couch and pulled my laptop from its sleeve where I’d left it after work. I perched on the corner of the couch and opened it, illuminating the dark with the bluish glow of the screen. I bit my lip, my fingers poised above the keys. I began to type.

I didn’t know what time it was. I knew my toes were freezing. I knew it felt good to be writing.

“Babe?”

I jerked my head up. My cheeks flamed.

“Babe, what are you doing? It’s two in the morning.” Bill hung onto the stair railing, his dim shape just barely visible. Though I couldn’t see it, I could picture the way his brows were probably scrunching together.

I hoped the computer screen wasn’t so bright that my blush was visible. What was there for me to be embarrassed of anyway?

“Oh! Just getting some ideas down. I’m coming back up now.” I quickly saved what I’d written, clapped my laptop closed, and uncurled myself from the couch.

Lying back in bed, I fumed. But it was silly. Del would still be there tomorrow. I shivered and snuggled closer to the heat of Bill’s body.

The library ladies give Del his distance—to his immense relief—but they can’t help noticing that he is different somehow. He’s even more distant, and they cluck with concern as he disappears into the stacks.

Del’s silence is his attempt at insulating his head against the clamor of pain. He goes about his job mechanically. Without interruption. He’s reshelving books in Popular Reading when Allison sees him.

“Imagine finding you in a library.”

Del turns at the sound of her voice and is met by Allison’s alarming appearance, alarming in the way perfect pale skin, a skein of blonde hair, and icy blue eyes can be. She’s smiling, but it’s small, controlled.

“Allison. How’ve you been?” Del smiles, and it surprises him. His cheeks immediately burn with shame. He turns his head.

“Oh, you know. Just getting used to the ‘real world’ that college doesn’t prepare you for.” She tilts her head, and Del knows she’s appraising him.

“I didn’t know you’d moved to the city,” he offers. “But I haven’t really talked to Fitz or Sam or any of them for awhile.”

“I heard you’d fallen off the planet.” She waits for him to explain.

He doesn’t; he replaces another book and wheels his cart a little further down the row.

Allison takes a couple steps after him and shifts the oversized books in her arms. “We should get coffee or lunch sometime. I live just a few blocks over. Your number the same?”

“Yeah. It is.” Del keeps his eyes on the book cart as Allison stares at him a little longer. She takes another step forward, reconsiders, and turns to go.

“I’ll give you a call this week. It’ll be good to catch up. It’s been too long.”

“Yeah. Give me a call.” He still doesn’t look up.

Allison shrugs and glides out of the aisle. Del hangs his head, grips the shelves, and sags against their support.

I was staring at my blinking cursor when Leah’s message popped onto my screen.

“Will you be ready to go in about twenty minutes?”

Twenty minutes?? I thought. I looked at the clock. *How the hell did it get to be 11:30 already?* I had spent the whole morning on this stupid story. “Crap!” I whispered

aloud. I sent a hurried affirmative back to Leah, saved and closed what I'd written, and forced myself to be incredibly productive for twenty minutes.

At lunch, waiting in line for our soup and sandwiches, Leah asked me, "Has Gwen lit a fire under you or what? You were in the zone this morning. Every time I passed by you were staring at your screen, tapping on your keys."

"Yeah," I said, a little sheepish. "I was actually working on a story." Instant regret.

"A story?"

"Uhm, yeah. Just for fun."

"About what?"

"Uhm, I guess it's a love story."

"Oh, cool."

"It's still really early, and I'm not sure where it's going or what I'm going to do with it. I'd kind of rather not talk about it."

Leah looked a little abashed. "Oh, okay. Whatever," she said and slid her tray down the line.

I bit my lip, feeling like I'd just had a near collision. I sat down at the table with some trepidation, but Leah didn't bring it up, and she didn't press me later. I listened absently to the conversation of my three lunch companions behind my sandwich. I wanted to keep Del to myself. It was so new, so unfamiliar. I didn't want to be analyzed.

Still feeling the sting of regret, for the rest of the day at work I immersed myself in data analysis, charts, and curriculum standards. I consoled myself with the thought of

an evening in front of my laptop. Bill wouldn't be over until late; I would have time alone with Del.

The deli is full. It's everyone's lunch hour. Del placidly eats his chicken salad sandwich. Allison sits across from him. Her expression is clouded and growing darker.

"Del, what have you done to yourself?" Allison glares at him. "You don't look healthy. I have to practically beg you to come have lunch with me."

Del puts down his sandwich. "I'm fine."

Allison presses on, "You never return Fitz's calls."

"I've been busy."

"Doing what?" He doesn't answer. She sighs. "You need to socialize. With your peers. Instead of spending all your time in the library."

"I like the library," he mumbles.

"Yes, I know, but you need to interact! With people!"

"Allison, please, get over it." He wads up his napkin.

"Fine." She changes tack. "I'm going to be at Tolliver's at nine o'clock. I want you to meet me there."

"Oh, come on." Del rolls his eyes. A smoky bar is the last place he wants to spend his evening, which isn't saying a whole lot since the only place he wants to be is in his house alone expect for his dog, who doesn't ask any questions.

"You come on. Nine o'clock," she says with finality. She stands up, grabs her purse, and looks at him with a mixture of concern and distaste. "You won't do anything wrong. I promise."

He looks at her, mildly surprised. And she smirks and walks off. Del sighs. He leaves a few bills on the table and heads back to the library.

Pulling into his driveway after work, he pauses. He groans and goes in. He goes through the motions of taking out the dog and feeding him. He feeds himself. He sits in front of the TV, he does a little laundry, he flips through a coupon mailer. He cleans the toilets, he checks the smoke detectors, he looks at old yearbooks. He turns on the radio. He turns off the radio and turns on his computer. He downloads some music. He sits on his bed.

It's nine o'clock.

Cristo sits in front of him, looking expectant (as dogs always do). Del scratches his ears.

"Would it be wrong? Is it too soon?" Cristo likes his hand. "I can have fun, right, buddy? I'll just go out for a few drinks. It's nothing."

Having convinced himself, Del puts on a clean shirt and goes to the bathroom to check his hair. He needs to shave but decides not to. He runs his hands through his hair a few times. He reaches for some cologne but stops. He frowns. Why should he bother? He looks at himself in the mirror.

"It's not wrong," he says aloud. He sprays a little cologne on and leaves.

At Tolliver's it's crowded. He slides his IDs back in his wallet as he makes his way towards the bar. The haze of smoke is already forming, and the buzz of conversation is just audible over the crushing chords of alternative rock. He shoulders past guys posted up along the wall watching the knots of girls doing their best to be unapproachable and available. He sees Allison sitting at one end of the bar. She hasn't seen him yet. Del swallows. She is beautiful after all. Her light hair is long and loose. Her arms are bare. She sits alone—defiant, terrible. "Just a little fun," he

says to himself. And then she sees him. Her face lights for a millisecond before setting into hard triumph. Del shrugs and smiles and crosses to her.

“You came,” she says, more a statement of confirmation than surprise.

“I did.”

She stubs out her cigarette and leans onto the bar. Despite being busy, the bartender is across from her in an instant. “I need another Stoli-cran, and my friend” (here the bartender shoots a disappointed glance at Del) “needs....” She looks at Del for a second. “He needs a double bourbon and ginger.” Then she adds, “And bring us a shot.” She looks back at Del. “We’re celebrating.”

Bill and I had been together for almost three years. We practically lived together, but we each still had our separate places. I couldn’t ever bring myself to move in with him (nor could he with me, really) because our parents were all of the “you don’t live together until you’re married” set. But we still shared a bed every night. It was a comfortable relationship. Familiar.

We were watching *Tristan & Isolde*, one of my favorites, during a night in. Well, I was watching; Bill was tolerating.

“Ooh, here comes Tristan.” Bill nudged me for what must have been the thirtieth time in twenty minutes.

“Stop!” I cast a cold glance at him. “You’re ruining my movie.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s just stupid,” he said.

“Well, I like it, so be quiet.” Bill sighed, which annoyed me further. I paused the movie. “Look, go do something else then. There’s another TV, you know.”

“But I want to spend time with you.”

Now I rolled my eyes. “Then be quiet and let me watch. You don’t always have to ruin the things I like.”

Bill chose to ignore that last generalization. “I don’t know why you like this movie so much. It’s not very good.”

“I think it is.”

“They don’t even end up together.” (He’d watched it with me before.)

“That’s not the point.”

“Shouldn’t it be? Otherwise, she could be happy with the king-guy.”

“No,” I said, “that doesn’t have to be the point. She could be *happy* maybe, but she doesn’t love him. The point is she loves Tristan.”

“Girls over-think stuff.”

“It’s not over-thinking at all! In fact, it’s not thinking. It’s following your heart.”

“That’s so cliché.”

“Well, here’s another one: the heart wants what it wants.”

“You believe that?”

I had to think. “I’m not sure. Maybe I want to believe it.” I started the movie again.

After a few minutes, Bill said, “What does your heart want?”

I paused the movie again, with exaggeration, and glared at Bill. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” He snuggled up to me and did his best to look sweet. “Does it want me?”

I was still irritated, but I smiled reassuringly and answered, “Yes, dear,” and gave him a kiss. To my relief, he was satisfied, laid his head in my lap, and didn’t talk the rest of the movie.

Del discovers that going out with Allison is strangely liberating. The evening always devolves into an inebriated fog. It’s numbing. Soon his days are spent dragging himself around the library, crippled by the previous night’s activities. But it’s nice, not having to feel anything. Including guilt.

Well into another evening, Del is pressed into the corner of a bar with Allison. She chews some ice and then asks, “Okay. So what happened to you after college?”

“Uhm.” He furrows his brows. “Uhm, I traveled around for awhile. Saw some of the country.”

She swirls the ice in her glass. “You ever date anybody?”

Del frowns, and he swallows the dual impulse to tell her to mind her own business and to blurt out his heartache. “No one worthwhile.” He will punish himself for that comment later.

“Oh. Me either.” She looks at him awhile. “You know, you were different in college. Not so...closed off.”

“Me? I’m not closed off. Besides, *you* were different in college.” He points a finger at her.

She leans on her elbow and carelessly says, “Time changes people.”

“You weren’t so....” Del struggles to think of the word.

“Bitchy?” she suggests. And laughs. And grows serious. “Yeah, I know.” She gives him a strange look. “Always wanting what you can’t have can do that.”

Again, Del feels a pang of guilt in his gut, and he represses the name that comes to his lips. He squeezes his eyes closed and coughs on his drink.

“You okay?” Allison pats his back.

“Yeah, fine,” he says and shakes his head. He swallows the rest of his drink in a gulp. “Let’s go somewhere else. Somewhere louder.”

Allison shrugs. “Okay.”

They close their tabs and squeeze out onto the street. It’s a warm enough night, and the street is filled with people. Allison drags him into a bar where the bass is flooding out the door. Del hangs back, and she grabs his hand. They stop at the bar for a round of shots and then head to the small and packed dance floor. The music thuds through his chest and vibrates in his bones. *Much better*, he thinks.

Allison presses herself against him and says, “Come with me. I love this song.” The smell of cigarettes, alcohol, and perfume is at once nauseating and intoxicating. Del follows her through the crowd, his glassy eyes transfixed by the bare skin of her back. She pulls him into the pulsing throng. She sees his wary expression. “Relax.” She glides into his arms, and her mouth is at his ear again. “Del. Relax.”

He stops thinking at all and allows himself to be swallowed into the waves of people.

Hours later, he lies in bed in a dark and unfamiliar room. Curled on his side, he grips the edge of the bed. He feels sick. He shoves the covers off and flies to the cool rim of the toilet.

“Del?”

He gags, swallows, and says, “I’m fine.” He stays there for another minute, clenching his eyes closed, willing himself to be somewhere else. But he isn’t. He is here. With Allison. The reality causes his stomach to take another lurch, and he hangs over the edge of the toilet.

He groans a little and picks himself up. He pauses in front of the mirror, eyes stinging. He stumbles back to bed.

“Too much for one night?” Allison murmurs. She’s still facing her edge of the bed.

“Guess so,” he mumbles. Del crawls back under the covers, confining himself to the smallest sliver of mattress possible.

She sighs, and Del prays for sleep...and forgiveness.

Just before seven, Del gets up and starts getting dressed. The smell of the bar still heavy on his clothes makes his stomach turn. He tries to be quiet. Allison stirs.

“Hey.”

Del forces a smile. “Hey.”

“Going so soon?” Allison says. A hint of sarcasm.

“Yeah, Cristo needs to go out.” Del pulls on his shirt.

“Ah.” Allison props herself up on her elbows. Her bare shoulders peek over the sheet.

Del swallows.

“Uhm, I’ll give you a call.” He fumbles around, checking that he has everything. He leans awkwardly over the bed towards Allison.

She puts her hand up. “Morning breath.”

Del smiles and nods. "Right. Okay. See you later." He leaves.

"Bye," Allison says.

She gets up and goes to the bathroom, grabs a robe. She looks at herself in the mirror—leftover eye makeup smudged, tangled hair. But that's not what causes a trace of the same reproach in Del's reflection to cross her face.

She frowns. "You're pathetic."

Bill came in and threw his coat on the couch. I smiled over my shoulder at him, and he came over and wrapped his arms around me. He planted a couple kisses on my neck, and I shrugged and chuckled. "Hello, to you, too."

He crossed to the fridge and pulled out a Mountain Dew. "Paul called and wanted to know if we want to go to trivia at the Tavern and have a few beers. You want to go?"

"Oh, I don't know. I have some work I want to do." I nodded towards my laptop in front of me.

Bill frowned. "You writing that story?"

"Yes," I said testily.

"You going to let me read it?"

"Maybe." (No.)

"Well, I had a long day at work, so I'm going to go."

"Okay, that's fine. I just don't feel like going. No reason you can't go."

"I know; we just haven't really been out together in awhile."

“Well, I don’t know if I’d count trivia with Paul and them as quality time anyway.”

Bill sighed. “Okay.” He flopped on the couch and turned on Sports Center. “What do you want to do for dinner?” he called.

“Uhm, there’s an oven meal in the freezer,” I said distractedly.

“You want me to put it in?”

I sighed and clapped my laptop shut. “I got it,” I said.

I made as much noise as possible.

Del gets home, takes care of a patient Cristo, then he paces.

“What the hell was I thinking?” he asks aloud. He looks at Cristo. “What’s wrong with me?”

The dog replies with a faint wagging of his tail. Del runs his hands through his hair after making another lap. He sits on the edge of his bed. Cristo comes and put his head on his leg. Del looks at the dog’s brown eyes, full of unconditional fidelity.

“What have I done?”

Del picks up his phone but stops short of dialing. Who could he call? He snorts and tosses the phone behind him. He rises, paces some more, goes to the bathroom but can’t look at his reflection. Finally, he grabs his phone and dials a number. It rings a couple times before someone picks up.

“Hello?”

“Mark? It’s Del.”

There's a silence on the other end. Then, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I just...needed someone to talk to." Del grips the phone tightly.

"And you call me?"

"Well, you are my brother."

"Del, we...don't do this. We don't talk."

"Mark, come on. I...I don't have anyone else to talk to."

Mark sighs. "What is it?"

"I don't know what to do. There's this girl."

"Jesus, Del, you call me out of nowhere, and you want to talk about girl problems?"

"I'm serious! I think I made a huge mistake."

"Is she pregnant?"

"No."

He pauses. "Are you on drugs?"

"What? No!"

"You need money? Someone after you?"

"No! Why--?"

"Because there's no way this is just about a non-pregnant girl."

"Mark, I slept with this girl, and I don't think I should have."

"She married? Got a boyfriend?"

"No..."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I...I love someone else."

Mark pauses. "The other girl going to find out?"

"No."

"You want to keep sleeping with this girl...what's her name?"

"Allison."

"You want to keep sleeping with Allison?"

"No, I don't think so."

"But you might."

"I don't know," he mumbles, already feeling an itch for a glass of bourbon.

"Okay, does the girl you love *know* you love her?"

"Yeah," Del says slowly, "...but she's...not available."

"Oh, well, then who cares? If she doesn't want you, move on. Fuck whoever you want."

"It's not that she doesn't want—I mean, she's...." *Dead*, is what he thinks, but he says, "It's complicated."

"Whatever, man. Look. You're young. You're single. If this Allison's single, don't worry about it." He pauses. "I know what it's like to love someone. I'm married, right? I'm sure it'll be hard to get over this chick, but you've got to do it. Or you'll turn yourself into a wreck. And maybe Allison's just a good rebound."

"Yeah, okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"I know I'm right. And...and you'll meet the right girl who is available someday. Until then, just have fun, alright?"

“Alright.”

“Okay. Everything else okay? Still at the library?”

“Yeah. Don’t start.”

“What? I just think you should look for a job that actually uses your degree.”

“Why; it’s not like I have to. I don’t need money.”

“I’m just saying.”

“How is Jamie?”

“Good, good. Everything’s good here. We, uh, we want to have kids soon.”

“Wow, that’s great. That’s great.”

“I better get going, Del.” A pause. “We’ll talk again soon, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’d be nice.”

“Bye, Del.”

“Bye, Mark.”

Del hangs up the phone. He looks down at Cristo. “Just a rebound,” he says.

While we were both lingering by the copier, Leah asked me quietly, “How’s that story you’ve been working on?”

I’d forgotten I’d mentioned it. My cheeks flushed. “Oh, it’s coming along. You know. Slowly but surely.”

She opened her mouth to say something, closed it, and then finally asked, “Could I, you know, read it sometime?”

“Oh! Uhm...well, it’s not done.”

“I know, but, well, I’m pretty good at editing and stuff. You know, if you just wanted an opinion. I don’t have to tell anyone about it.”

“Well, it’s just kind of different. It’s not like a regular love story.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, it’s about...it’s about a guy, who’s... in love with someone who’s dead...who’s not real,” I said lamely.

“Not real?”

“Right...like...a character from a book.”

“Huh. That is different.” Leah must have seen my clouded expression. “No, different, like in a good way. I haven’t read anything like that.” She toyed with some paperclips. “Is there going to be a happy ending?”

“Uhm, no, I guess not. I don’t really like happy endings.”

Leah smiled. “I thought everyone did!”

“They’re not real,” I said bluntly.

Leah looked at me quizzically. “Anyway, it sounds interesting. I’d really like to see it. I bet it’s good.”

“Yeah. I guess. Let me get a little more done to it first though.”

The copier finished, and I grabbed my pages and fled to my desk. My heart was pounding. Leah floated by and smiled at me. I managed a weak smile in return.

Del’s workday at the library goes by slowly and without incident. Allison doesn’t call him for lunch. She doesn’t call that evening. And he doesn’t call her. He takes Cristo for a long walk,

and he doesn't mind that the dog stops to smell every bush and tree. When they get home, it's dark. Del looks around his empty house. He walks back out the door, gets in his car, and drives the few blocks to a little liquor store, where he purchases a fifth of bourbon, and he returns home.

The next day is Saturday. Del doesn't have to work, and the day stretches out like an eternity in front of him. So he drinks, and he alphabetizes his DVDs, he cleans the bathrooms, he gives Cristo a bath, he reads some Horace McCoy. He has some more bourbon. And then he calls Allison.

"Hey, it's Del."

"Yeah, I know. Caller ID."

"Oh, right. I just wondered if...maybe...I wondered what you're doing tonight."

"I don't have plans. What about you?"

"Me, no plans. Just around the house now."

"You been drinking?"

"No," he lies.

"Hmm." She pauses. "Well, you want to?"

"Yes. Meet me at Tolliver's at 8:30?"

"Sure."

"Kay, see you in a bit."

Allison hangs up. Del looks at the silent phone and then goes to change his clothes. He's there by eight.

When Allison arrives, she says, "To be honest, I'm kind of surprised you called."

"Why shouldn't I call?" Del doesn't listen to the answer in his head.

Allison purses her lips and then says, "You're right. Why shouldn't you?" She orders a drink for herself and pulls out a cigarette while she waits for it to be made.

Del starts, "Look, about...about..."

Allison cuts him off, "Please. No big deal. Don't make it one." She smiles encouragingly at him.

Del is relieved. She sees it. "Yeah, okay." Allison's drink has arrived. They toast.

They resume their drinking partnership, and eventually, Del returns to her bed—always with the same guilt, followed by the same rationalization. But they practically have an arrangement. One that doesn't involve labels or relationships. Or, for Del, any real emotion at all.

So one night he calls Allison as soon as he gets home from work. The phone rings several times. It's probably on its way to voicemail when she picks up.

"Hi, Del."

"Hey, glad I caught you. You up for the Circle tonight?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Oh." Actual disappointment. "You're not feeling well?"

"It's not that. I just...I don't want to do this anymore."

"Oh. Well, I could bring a bottle over there."

"No. I mean. I don't want to do this—us—any more. I mean, there's not an 'us,' right?"

Del's throat dries. "Right, because I thought we were just having fun."

"Well, it's not fun for me anymore," Allison says flatly.

Del doesn't want to ask, but he has to. "What do you mean?"

Allison sighs. She doesn't want to explain, but she has to. "You only call when you want to go get drunk."

"That's not true..."

"You don't ever ask me to come over."

"I..."

"You...you only touch me when you're drunk."

Silence.

"You don't look at me when...we're...together." Del is still silent. He knows it's true. "It's just not fun for me anymore," she says. "It's a waste of time."

Del clears his throat. "I understand. I'm sorry I can't..."

"Don't. Don't be sorry. That's...just don't say you're sorry."

"Okay."

"I'll, uh, give you a call sometime for lunch or something."

"Yeah, sure."

"Why don't you give Fitz a call?"

"Right, right. Take care of yourself, Allison."

"Always."

They hang up. Del still holds the phone in his hand. *She can't just do that*, he thinks. He needs her. He needs her?

"What are you thinking about?" Bill asked me as we drove home from dinner with friends.

“Hmm, what?” I said.

“What are you thinking about over there?” He glanced at me and smiled.

“Oh, nothing.” I looked out the window. The low strains from the radio softened the silence. Finally I added, “Do you think people have to be with the wrong person before they can be with the right person?”

Bill looked at me. He stiffened uncomfortably. “I don’t know. What makes you ask that?”

“Oh, I don’t mean us,” I said. “I was just thinking...well, of the characters in my story.”

“Oh. Okay.” He didn’t sound too confident. He kept his eyes on the road ahead. “Is your *character* with the wrong person?”

“Definitely. But the other person doesn’t think so.”

“Then maybe your character’s wrong.”

“It’s not a question of what the character thinks. It’s...it’s the universe...it’s against fate. They’re not supposed to be together, regardless of what either of them thinks.”

“That’s crap. You can be with who you want to be with.”

“Love the one you’re with?”

“Of course, because then you’ll be with the one you love.”

“I don’t think the saying is meant that way.”

“Well, people saying ‘it’s meant to be’ or ‘not meant to be’ is just a cop out. You can make it work or choose not to.”

“That’s kind of a...passion-less view of things.”

“It’s a realistic view of things.”

“I guess you’re right. But that doesn’t help my characters.”

Bill seemed to relax a little bit. “Well, they’re just made-up after all. Anyway, I love you.” He squeezed my hand.

“Love you, too,” I said and turned back to the window.

Allison answers the door, her face the usual cool mask. Except for something unfamiliar in her eyes. She doesn’t step aside to let him in.

“I think we should talk. I didn’t get a chance to say everything.” Del fidgets, brushes his hair back, puts his hands in his pockets. She doesn’t move. “I guess I knew...I’ve known that this wasn’t the same for me as it was for you. I guess if I’d thought about it, I’d have expected it to end sooner, or maybe I could have been strong enough to do it.” He sighs. “But that’s just it. I’m not strong enough. And I...I....” He looks at Allison, stares into her eyes. “I need you.” He takes a step toward her.

She holds up a hand. Her face ripples from composed to pained and back again. “I think you need to go home. I think you need to really think carefully before you say something you don’t mean.”

He takes another step to her so that he’s just an inch or two in front of her. She manages to hold his gaze, and he doesn’t see the slight tremble of her hand.

“I mean it,” he says softly. “I need you. I want you.” He brings a hand to her cheek. He forces himself to keep staring in her blue eyes. (If only they were brown!)

Her face crumples. No retort now. Even though she wants to yell at him because she does know better. She knows in her bones that she can't trust him, that he can't trust himself. A tear escapes; her armor is riddled with cracks.

Del sees the tear, brushes it with a fingertip, and feels his own throat tighten. A small voice in his head still cries, *What are you doing?* So he presses his mouth against hers, and the voice stops. When he pulls back, he's a little surprised to see not happiness in Allison's expression but defeat.

She finally steps aside, and Del goes in.

Their renewed "relationship" borders on professional at best. Each is suddenly more polite, more formal. Del even asks Allison to come over to his house. It makes him anxious—her coming there. She arrives, seats herself comfortably on the couch, and accepts the drink Del offers her. He fidgets.

"So you want to watch a movie?" he asks.

"Yeah, what do you have?"

He scans the rack. "I haven't watched *Enemy at the Gates* or *House of Flying Daggers* recently."

"I've never even heard of those. What's On Demand?"

Del scrolls through the movies provided by the cable service.

"Oh, what about *27 Dresses*?" Allison asks. He gives her a look. "Okay, okay, too chick-flicky."

They eventually agree upon *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, and Allison snuggles up to Del to watch. He concedes to putting his arm around her.

As the night wears on, it's clear to Del that Allison has the intention of staying. When it gets late, she walks back to his bedroom, and he goes to take Cristo out. While he's gone, Allison rummages for a t-shirt to sleep in. Underneath a pile of shirts in the bottom drawer, her hands bump against the hard shape of a book. She pulls it out. It's not one she's read. She thumbs through the pages, and she notices there are notes scribbled on almost every page. She's trying to decipher the added dialogue, face confused, when she hears Del return. She shoves the book back under a layer of shirts, plucks one out, and quickly closes the drawer. She is slipping into the t-shirt when Del walks in. He stops.

She smiles casually and says, "Hope you don't mind. I just wanted something to sleep in."

Del looks from her to the dresser and back to her again. He shrugs stiffly and walks into the bathroom.

Allison looks after him, eyebrows furrowed. She glances back at the drawer, three words from the cramped writing ringing in her ears: "I love you."

It's the only night she spends there.

I had another dream. This was my dream.

I was in the library. A man came up to help me. I knew it was Del, but I knew it couldn't be Del because he's not real. But it was him. He smiled at me, and I asked him about some book, and I was following him through the shelves, the aisles getting darker and narrower. I wanted to talk to him, but I couldn't find my voice. It's like my mouth

was full of sawdust, and I couldn't form any words around it. I was having trouble seeing because we were walking in a part that was now so dim. He took my hand, and his hand was clammy, not like I wanted it to be, which was strong and dry. And then it was Bill holding my hand, and I was wondering what happened to Del. We stopped in front of some books, but I couldn't find the one I wanted. And I was really upset.

Inordinately upset.

That's all I remember.

One night, Allison hugs her knees to her as she sits on her rumpled bed. Del is in the bathroom. He looks out at her.

"You okay?"

She hugs her knees a little tighter. "Uhm, yeah. That was just...a little...rough."

Del smiles. "I thought you liked it." He goes and sits beside her.

"I do, I guess, but..." She looks at him strangely.

Del becomes serious. "What?" Her lip trembles. "Allison, did I hurt you?" He's concerned.

He scans her arms for bruises.

She mutters, "I'm not hurt."

"What is it?"

Suddenly she glares at him. "You don't make *love* to me. It's like *hate* sex."

Del is stunned. He stands. "What? I don't hate you, Allison, I—"

"Love me?" she sneers.

His mouth closes. No, those words have never been said. She continues, looks away, "No, I know you don't." She looks back at him. "Do you know what love is?"

"What do you mean?" he asks warily.

She blurts, "You said you hadn't been with anyone!"

"I haven't; I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your book! I'm sorry, I found it, whatever. But there was writing all over it. Like *love letters!*"

"What? You--? That's private!"

"What are you not telling me?"

"There's nothing you need to know!"

"Who is this other girl?"

"No one!"

"Del! Don't lie to me! Did you love her?"

He doesn't say anything. He is reeling.

Allison stands. "Did you love her?" she asks again.

His eyes snap to her. "Yes!" he yells finally. "Yes, and she's dead!"

Allison's mouth drops open.

"She's dead, and I still love her!" The words are trapped in the room. Del's shoulders slump.

"You what?" Allison whispers, face white.

Del wipes his forehead and starts putting on his clothes. "This was a mistake," he says quietly.

Suddenly Allison is the one who is angry. "Yeah. It was, you lying son-of-a-bitch," she says acidly. She grabs his shirt, a sock and hurls them at him. "You selfish piece of shit!" she hisses.

Del turns back to look at her. He lowers his eyes. "I'm sorry," he says and leaves.

Allison waits until she hears the front door close before ripping a ceramic figurine off her dresser and slinging it into the hall where it shatters against the wall.

Outside, Del gets into his car and pauses. It's over. He's relieved.

The meeting was incredibly boring. I began doodling on the lengthy agenda. Ryan glanced sideways at me and smiled. I smiled back. He slid a piece of paper over to me.

Taking notes? he had written on it.

I smiled again. *Nah, I'll read yours,* I wrote and slid the paper back to him.

Don't need notes. Mind like a steel trap.

Except for printer codes.

He muffled a laugh. *I remember important stuff.*

Like?

He waited a few minutes before sending the page back. *Wuthering Heights is your fave.*

I blushed. *That's important?* I wrote.

Sure. After some hesitation, Ryan pulled the paper back to him and added, *If it's important to you.*

I knew my face must be scarlet, so I didn't look at him. *That's sweet*, I wrote.

Sweets to the sweet.

Hamlet?

Very good.

I smiled.

When the meeting was finally over (too soon perhaps), Ryan brushed by me, but not before he had squeezed my knee as he rose from his seat.

Leah murmured in my ear, "What was all that?"

"What?" I blushed and adjusted the folders in my arms.

"Does Bill have competition?"

My cheeks burned, but I rolled my eyes. "No. No office romances for me."

Leah winked and walked out. I followed, eyes down, though I did steal a glance towards Ryan's desk, and his blue eyes met my gaze.

Del immerses himself in the sanctuary of the library. He takes every opportunity to disappear with a cart of books to be reshelved and isolate himself in some far corner, shooing away any covert lovers occupying his favorite hideouts in the stacks. It is on his way to some far reach of the library that he passes the dark-haired girl for the first time. His pace slows, and his head swivels back for a second look. He estimates that she's in her early twenties, but there's still the freshness of her childhood lurking in her expression. He's only able to catch a glimpse of her bright eyes and rosy lips, but he watches her back as she takes her selections to the counter, checks out, and leaves.

He's at the circulation desk the day she returns. Del's heart lunges. She's with a teenage-girl and a young boy—siblings, surely. The three separate and drift towards different parts of the library. Del leaves the books he was cataloging and strays after her.

He discreetly straightens shelves, replaces books, aligns spines, always just a row over from where she is wandering. He can't see what she's pulling, but he knows she's in the Hs. Hardy? Hemingway? Howells? As she moves down the aisle, her fingertips brush the spines of the books. Lovingly. Del holds his breath. She rounds the corner and goes to the Bs. He sees her pause in front of the Brontës. (A familiar stopping point for high-schoolers carrying their reading lists.) Del peers at her from behind the shelves. Charlotte, Emily, or Anne? He smiles to himself when she goes with Emily.

Eventually she checks her watch, frowns a little, and makes her way back to circulation. Del cuts through A/V and beats her there. Soon the two others appear, and Del is casually waiting behind the desk when they approach. Knowing his disinclination to helping patrons, Maxine moves to assist them, but Del cuts her off and smiles at her surprise. Maxine glances at the dark-haired girl and back to Del, smiles knowingly, and backs away.

"Hi there," he says as he takes her books and those of the two others. She turns her eyes to Del—deep, brown eyes.

"Hi," she says.

Del glances behind her and sees the teenager evaluating him. He drops his eyes to the titles he is scanning: *Artemis Fowl* (for the boy), a couple from the Luxe series (for the teenager, presumably), and *Wuthering Heights*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Jude the Obscure*. "Required reading?" he asks.

“Oh, no,” she says. “Just for fun. Rereading in fact.” Her cheeks turn slightly pink.

“Hmm, unrequited love and lots of death...lots of fun,” he teases.

“I think so,” she says.

He hands her the books, smiles, and watches as the trio leaves. He glances back at the screen. “Skylar,” he murmurs.

“Hello? Are you alive?” Bill’s voice drifted upstairs. I kept my eyes closed. I heard him pause in the doorway, taking in my curled shape buried under covers at six o’clock in the evening. He walked over and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Hey,” he said gently, rubbing my shoulder. “You awake?”

I groaned.

“Are you sick?”

“No,” was my muffled response. “I was just tired and wanted a nap.”

“Okay.” I could hear the reprobation. “Do you want me to make dinner?”

“No, I’m coming.” I sighed and threw off the covers. I stalked downstairs and left Bill still on the bed.

I ate in a grumpy silence, which Bill tried to lift.

“What’s Cara been up to? You haven’t hung out with her in a long time.”

“Cara? I haven’t talked to her in months.”

“I know. Maybe you should call her.”

“Why?” I stabbed a piece of chicken.

“I don’t know. You used to go out with some friends. What about Denise? Or who do you work with? Leah, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “They don’t call me, why should I call them?”

“Just thought you’d want some fun,” he said, pushing food around his plate.

I glared at him. “I don’t feel like hanging out with them. I just don’t like to go out all that much anymore.”

Bill sighed to my intense annoyance. “Okay,” he said.

“Okay,” I said and took my plate into the kitchen.

When I got to work the next morning, there was a loosely wrapped package on my desk with a small card attached. I dropped my bags, sat down, and reached for the card.

It was blank, but inside someone had written, *Happy early birthday. I couldn’t wait.* I recognized the handwriting. It was from Ryan. I beamed. I tore off the wrapping paper and uncovered a t-shirt. It bore Thomas Hardy’s profile with the caption “Hardy Boy.” I loved it. I turned to get up, but Ryan was already hanging over my cubicle wall.

“Where did you find it? Thank you so much!” The words tumbled out, and my cheeks flamed.

“I just saw it at a hole-in-the-wall place and knew you’d like it. And I couldn’t wait another three weeks until your birthday.”

“But I’ve never gotten you anything,” I said.

“Who cares? It’s a t-shirt. I’m glad you like it.”

“I *love* it,” I said and clutched it to my chest.

“What’s the commotion?” Leah asked, appearing around the corner.

Ryan and I both turned a little pink. “Ryan got me an awesome t-shirt for my birthday,” I said, holding up my prize.

“Cool,” Leah said with raised eyebrows.

“Work beckons,” Ryan said suddenly, and he disappeared.

“Your birthday’s not for, like, another month, right?” Leah eyed me curiously.

“Right. He said he couldn’t wait.” My cheeks burning again.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“What?” I said.

“Oh, nothing,” she said and drifted back to her own desk.

I looked back at my new t-shirt. This was special.

“Tell me a secret.”

“What?”

They’re sitting on the back steps at his house. The night sky is clear and deep. Their skin glows in the moonlight.

“Tell me a secret,” she says again playfully.

Del laughs. “Okay. Let’s see. The library has reinforced floors because of the weight of all the books.”

She laughs. “That’s not a secret. I mean a secret about you.”

Del looks slightly troubled. “What do you mean? I don’t have any. You have secrets?”

“Sure,” she says. “For example, I once peed my pants in the car.”

“Like last week?” he teases.

“No, like when I was eight.” She elbows him.

“Oh, I see. Well, then. My secret is that I,” he pauses dramatically, “followed you around the library.”

She turns pink but rolls her eyes. “I mean, a serious secret.”

“Like what?”

“Like....” She pauses and then looks him in the eyes for a long time as if trying to gauge his sincerity. She leans over to whisper into his ear.

His expression grows troubled and then concerned. “When?” he asks quietly.

“Just after high school. I was stupid, thought I loved the guy. But I never even told him I was pregnant, let alone that I had a miscarriage.” She looks out into the darkness of the backyard for a while before looking back at him, a little timid, a little anxious. “I want to be honest with you. I feel...I feel like this is important.”

He reaches out to smooth her hair. “I’m sorry,” he says. “That must have been incredibly hard.”

When she doesn’t break his gaze, he kisses her softly. And when he pulls back, he flushes at the thought of his impulse. But he doesn’t feel guilty.

She slides over and settles into his arms. A little later she says, “You still need to spill.”

Del coughs. “I told you, I don’t have any secrets.” She nudges him. “Okay, okay.” He’s quiet for a moment and then says, “I have a brother.”

“You have a brother? Where? How old? Why didn’t you mention him when I asked about family before?” She sits up to face him.

“He lives back in Indiana. He’s a couple years older. We just never talk. We’re not that close.”

“I can’t imagine not talking to my brother and sister.” She shakes her head.

“I know, but we just don’t. Not for almost a year. In fact, I might even be an uncle.”

“Del! You have to call him!”

“If he wanted to talk to me, he would call.”

“Well, what if I want to meet him? You’ve met Lucy and Adam.”

“He lives in Indiana! And he doesn’t come here. I don’t think there’s going to be an opportunity for you to meet him.”

“You don’t have family get-togethers?”

Del shifts uncomfortably. “No.”

Skylar still looks at him incredulously.

“But...he’s all you have since—” She stops.

“Since my parents are dead? Yeah, I know.” There’s an edge in his voice. “Can we talk about something else now?”

Skylar leans against him again. They both stare ahead, both pensive, both silent.

Weeks later, as they lay entangled on the couch watching Season 1 of *The Tudors*, Skylar sighs and lifts herself.

“It’s getting late,” she says. “I better get going.”

Del gazes at her a second and then asks, "Why don't you stay tonight?" His pulse quickens because of his rashness, but he's more nervous that she won't than she will.

Skylar smiles softly. "You want me to?"

"Of course," he says, offering a slow smile in return and pulling her back to his chest.

"I don't have pajamas or a toothbrush or my contact stuff."

"Well, I'm sure I've got an extra toothbrush and contact case. And as for pajamas...well...I can think of one solution."

"Oh really?" she laughs.

"Really," he says seriously. So seriously that she looks up at him, and his warm brown eyes melt into hers.

She crawls up to his face and slowly, sweetly kisses each of his cheeks. She pauses in front of his lips. Del waits. When she finally kisses him, his eyes close, and his mind flounders, as usual, in the sensation of her...her *being*. No voices crowd his thoughts, and he allows himself to sink into the weightless silence.

"I read your story."

"You what?"

"You left your laptop open, and I read your story. Who's Del supposed to be?"

"I can't believe--! I told you I didn't want you to read it yet!" (Ever.) "And Del's not anyone. He's just a character."

"Well, he seems kind of realistic to just be made up."

“Well, he’s not real.” It actually kind of pained me to say those words. “It’s just a story. And that’s beside the point. You read my work without asking. That’s an invasion of my privacy.”

“Are you supposed to be Skylar?”

“What? No! I told you. They’re not real. It’s just a story.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

Bill didn’t ask me any other questions about Del. He kept quiet when I said I was tired or when I took naps. But I could see the questions in his face. I hated it. Which made me think I hated him. Which made me hate myself. Until mostly I just felt continual waves of cold nausea and bitterness.

I answered the phone with reluctance when Bill’s name would appear on the caller ID because I got so tired of feeling terrible about feeling terrible when I talked to him.

“Holy shit, you would not believe what just happened.”

“What?”

“I could have just died. I about got smoked by a semi.”

“Really?”

“I was in the middle lane, a semi behind me, and another semi was in the right lane, and there was a car to my left, so I’m practically boxed in, when a car coming off the ramp cut off the semi in the right lane, so he swerved to get in my lane. I don’t even

know how I missed him. I jerked to the right and slammed on my brakes. Lucky there wasn't a guy close behind the semi. It was nuts. My heart is still racing."

"Wow. That's crazy."

Bill was quiet a minute. "I could have died. I mean, I'm so glad I'm not dead, I had to call you."

"Yeah, I bet it was scary."

"What the hell?!" he suddenly exploded. "No 'I love you' or 'Thank God you're okay'? What the hell?"

"Well, aren't you okay?"

"Yeah, but you could show a little concern!"

"I am concerned!"

"Then act like it!"

"Whatever."

"Oh, great. Whatever. Good answer."

"Fine. I love you. I'm really glad you're okay."

"Great. I feel so much better. I'll call you later." He hung up.

Ugh. Get over yourself, I thought. I threw my phone on the floor and burrowed back under the covers.

The phone's ring woke me what must have been a couple hours later. I answered, still feeling groggy.

Bill said, "I think I'm just going to stay here tonight."

“O-kay.” I was surprised but almost relieved.

I didn’t ask for a reason, but Bill explained, “I just have some work I need to get done around here and then I need to get up early.” He was quiet a second. “You could...you could come over here if you want.” I anticipated this.

“I wish I could but I need to get some stuff done, too.”

“Yeah, I figured,” he said flatly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Don’t be so defensive.”

“Well, I just feel like you’re being passive aggressive.”

“I’m not being passive aggressive. I just don’t know why you can’t come over here.”

“I told you, I have some work to do.”

“What, on your story?” So he hadn’t let it go.

“So what?”

“You spend an awful lot of time writing something that you’re not going to do anything with.”

“Who says I’m not going to do anything with it? Maybe I’ll try to get it published.”

“You didn’t even want me to read it. Why would you let the whole world?”

I can’t argue with that. “It’s just something I need to do. Something I love doing.”

“Love? Need?”

I groaned. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

We hung up without the usual pleasantries for the second time that day.

Bill didn't come over the next night either. We talked, but the conversations were stiff. I actually kind of enjoyed having the place to myself. I mean, it was my place anyway. After the third night apart, we met up for dinner.

Bill looked a little uncomfortable sitting across from me. I felt annoyed already, but I tried to appear relaxed. We didn't talk much, just hid behind our menus. But when the orders were placed, there was only so long we could look around the restaurant and not at each other. I could see Bill trying to figure out what he could say that wouldn't put me off.

"What do you want?" he finally asked.

I wasn't expecting this question. I wasn't sure what he meant. "What do I want?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "I don't really know anymore. And I used to. But now I have to ask. What do you want? From me?"

I didn't know what to say. I looked at his cloudy gray eyes, the smooth cheeks I had kissed so many times...so familiar, so steadfast. "I want us to be together," I mumbled.

Bill's face remained unchanged. "It's hard to tell."

"I know," I said. "I've been feeling a little down lately I guess, and I'm sorry for taking it out on you."

“But that’s just it. You don’t ‘take it out’ on me. I can tell you don’t—It’s like you don’t like me. And to be honest, I don’t like you so much right now.” He sighed.

“But it’s not even that. You’re more just indifferent. And that hurts.”

I felt my throat getting tighter. I couldn’t nail down just one emotion. I was angry with him, I was sorry for him, I was sorry for me. “I’m not indifferent. I do care.”

“I don’t think you do. Or at least I don’t see that you do.”

I rolled my eyes, and he dropped his head.

“We’re not happy,” he said, “and I need to know if you think we’re going to be happy again.”

“I don’t know,” I said lamely.

He sighed. “Well, when you figure it out, it’d be nice if you let me know.”

I glared at him. Anger is easier than empathy.

I was a coward, I guess. So that night I went over to his place. To make amends. And lying in his bed, I felt...I felt numb. It was like an out of body experience. I put my mind somewhere else. I closed my eyes and listened to Bill’s breathing. I drifted further away, eyes still closed.

Slowly I reached out my hand, and then I was touching him. I ran my hand down the warm length of his back, over the curve of his arm. He rolled over. I kept my eyes closed tightly, and I bit my lip. I brushed my fingertips over his chest, over his stomach. And then there was a hand against my cheek and in my hair. My eyes were closed. A pair of soft lips pressed against mine and then against my jaw, my neck, my collarbone.

We wrapped our arms around each other; we became tangled in a crush of heat and skin and mouths and groping and sex.

When it was over, I still lay against him, my head on his chest. He stroked my hair until gradually his hand dropped to his side. He was asleep. I opened my eyes. It was Bill.

I looked at his content face. I slid out of his embrace, rolled onto my side, and held my pillow over my mouth. I cried. I shuddered with sobs, and I hoped Bill would stay asleep.

I left before Bill woke up. I know that must have hurt him—to wake up to an empty bed. And he must have known then. He must have known I'd given up.

I called in to work. I never call in. But I just didn't feel like going in and having to...having to make an effort. Bill called. He would be coming over after he got done with work. To talk. My stomach churned as each hour brought us closer to the inevitable. Suddenly, it seemed, it was after six, and Bill was knocking on my door. He looked so serious and pained as I opened the door that I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

I sat. He stood. He was quiet. He was going to make me talk, make me say the words. And why shouldn't I?

"I'm not happy. And I don't think...I can be happy...with you anymore." I couldn't look at him. "I want some time apart...indefinitely." I whispered the last word. He had to know that it wouldn't be just a few days, that it could be...forever. The finality

hit me then, and I began to cry, and I hated myself for crying because *I* was doing this. I was doing this to us, and I had no right to cry.

Bill was rubbing his hands together. He finally said, “Your happiness is all that matters to me. It kills me...it’s killing me that I’m not...that I can’t make you happy anymore.”

“It’s not about you not making me happy; it’s me. It’s me needing something else.” How could I make him understand?

“Exactly. Something I’m not.” I just shook my head. Bill went on, “I don’t know how we got here. I feel like I should have seen it, should have been able to prevent it.” I shook my head again. “But we’re here now. And,” he came over to sit beside me, “and I’m not going to yell or be angry. Because I love you. Always. And I always will. And because I love you, I want you to do what’s best for you, even if that means not being with me.” He dropped his head for a moment and then looked back at me. “No one is going to love you as much as I do,” he said softly.

“I know,” I whispered. And I believed it.

“I know...I know you loved me...you *love* me too. I can only hope you remember that.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. I felt the urge to throw my arms around his neck and keep him from leaving, but I didn’t. I couldn’t now.

I stayed home from work again the next day. After sleeping through most of the morning, I eventually propped myself up under layers of covers and opened my laptop. I stared at the screen. I wasn’t sure what would come next. I couldn’t see it. I closed my

eyes. And it occurred to me I didn't even feel like writing anymore. If anything, I just wanted to lie around thinking about Del and his story. I actually smiled to myself. I was going to wallow. And the day drifted by in a haze of sluggishness.

The next day I somehow managed to drag myself in to work, but I might as well have stayed home for the amount of actual work I accomplished. As each day crawled by, I found my motivation lessening in direct proportion to the growing length of my to-do list. I wasn't surprised when I was finally called in to Gwen's office.

"Are you going to have the reviews ready this week?" Gwen asked me.

"Yes," I said, though I didn't know how I was going to get all of them done in one week, which is why Gwen had assigned them to me three weeks ago.

"Okay," she said more than a little skeptically. "Do you...do you, are you feeling okay? I've noticed a little drag for a while now. And you've called in a couple times, which you never do. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm fine. I apologize." I put on my best smile.

"It's, uhm, okay. I'm just a little worried about you."

I smiled again. "Oh, no need. Everything's fine."

She nodded, and I left her office. I went straight to the women's restroom and tumbled into a stall.

I was exhausted, and suddenly I was crying. No sobs, just tears coursing down my cheeks. *Great. Ruined makeup*, I thought. Not that I had put much on that morning.

I calmed myself to a degree and walked out to check the damage in the mirror. As expected, my makeup was a mess. But what was not expected was my overall

appearance. I just looked like hell in general. I patted my cheeks, took some deep breaths, put on my mask, and went back out.

“God, work sucks,” I said and took another sip. Contrary to previous statements, I was out for dinner and a drink with Ryan. Not a date. Just friends.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you’re still wowing old Gwen.”

“I don’t know. I just can’t concentrate.” I shook my head, as if clearing it.

“Trouble in paradise?” he asked, half-serious, half-joking.

I groaned. I looked at him, took another drink, and said, “Bill and I are done.”

“Oh,” he said. “I’m sorry. That’s got to be rough.” He sounded like he meant it.

“Yeah. So life sucks too.”

“He’ll realize his mistake.”

“It’s not his mistake,” I said.

“Oh.”

“I just...I wasn’t, I’m not happy. Nothing makes me happy. Well, almost nothing.” I smiled at him. Pseudo-happiness is better than nothing.

He smiled back at me and leaned in a little. “The effect is mutual.” We each took another drink.

A little later he walked me back to my car. I turned to say goodbye, and he was so close. So close I wanted to touch the buttons on his shirt. We hugged. I pressed my cheek against his shoulder. “Get some sleep,” he whispered into my hair. If only he

knew how much sleep I had been getting. We separated; I nodded and climbed into my car.

“See you tomorrow,” I said.

“See you tomorrow.”

When I drove off, he was still standing there, watching after my car.

Del and Skylar fall into an easy relationship. He catches himself staring at her sometimes.

“Did you see if Liza and Abe want to come?” he asks her as he packs a picnic basket.

Skylar raises her eyebrows. “You mean Lucy and Adam?”

“Yeah. What’d I say?”

“Liza and Abe?”

“Oh. Don’t know where that came from.”

“Yeah. Me either.”

He drops his eyes back to the basket and concentrates on his packing.

“Anyway, no, I didn’t. Figured it could be just us,” she says and walks over to him. She wraps her arms around him and turns him toward her.

“That’s always good,” he says and kisses the top of her head.

She lets him go and moves around the kitchen, occasionally casting a curious glance in his direction.

Another week dragged by without incident, without word from Bill. I was even getting over the guilt I felt for enjoying my solitude. And the guilt I felt for taking

pleasure in Ryan's attention. So when an unusually nervous Ryan asked me if I wanted to join him and some friends for a night out, I said yes.

I lamented over the clothes in my closet. It'd been so long since I'd been out on a weekend, I didn't feel like I had anything suitable. I finally settled on jeans, heels, and a subtly sexy top—the weekend uniform for most girls—and I gave little thought to the fact that my jeans were looser and that my dark shirt was stark against my pale skin.

On my drive over to meet Ryan, I was actually giddy. And I was more bubbly and sociable meeting his friends than I'd been in a long time. It was a good night. It felt good to be out, to enjoy myself, to be with Ryan, who rarely left my side, who would absently leave his hand on the small of my back, who would look at me in a way that made the rest of the room dissolve.

At one point, someone mentioned being from the Midwest, and I looked at Ryan and said, "Isn't your brother from Indiana?"

He smiled. "I don't have a brother."

"Yeah, you told me you did. Named Mark."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did," I laughed. "You said you didn't talk much. I distinctly remember the conversation."

Ryan's smile faded a little, and I saw his friends look at him questioningly. "You're thinking of someone else. We didn't have that conversation."

I closed my open mouth. Ryan looked at me quizzically. I shook my head, laughed again, and said, "Well, whatever."

I brushed off the incident and evidently so did Ryan because he didn't ask me about it. The rest of the night went smoothly. Ryan gave me a peck on the cheek as we said our goodbyes, and I went home and fell into a long, dreamless sleep.

He came over. We talked and laughed and pulled out Trivial Pursuit and quizzed each other on everything except Sports and Science (my rules). He tossed pie pieces at me. We watched a movie, me settled against his chest, his thumb absently brushing my thigh. The movie was an unrequited love story (my pick). He tucked some hair behind my ear and then ran his hand down my arm, then twined his fingers with mine. I looked at our hands together. I sat up, turned, and sat on my knees facing him. He shifted so that he could get closer, and he brought his face to my cheek, my neck. I tilted my head back a little, enjoying the electricity of his breath on my skin. He traced a fingertip from my brow to my jaw, and then he cupped my face with both hands and pulled me to him. We kissed. But it was more than a kiss. I clung to him. I clung to him as if all my desire could be swallowed up in his arms.

They're at dinner. They're walking out. Del puts his arm around her shoulders, and Skylar leans against him. Del barely notices when a terrifying blonde stops in front of them.

"Del?"

"Allison! Hey." Del drops his arm.

Allison looks at the couple first with confusion, then with recognition, then with bitterness.

"It's been awhile," she says dryly. She turns to Skylar. "I'm Allison."

“Nice to meet you; I’m Skylar.”

“I guess you could call me the ex, but I don’t know if drunk sex qualifies as a relationship.”

She laughs at Del’s discomfort and Skylar’s surprise. “I should warn you, he doesn’t do real relationships.”

“Allison,” Del says with—what? warning? wariness? apology?

“No, Del, she should be warned before she gets her heart broken. I mean, no one likes a hollow, bitter bitch, right?” She grimaces at her self-evaluation. To Skylar she says, “Del can’t love you, so don’t bother. He loves someone else.” She sways. “Oh, don’t look at me. It sure as hell isn’t me. No. He loves a dead girl.” She grabs his arm, and he shrugs her off. “It’s hysterical.”

“You’re drunk, and you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Tess,” she spits. “I’m talking about Tess, you psycho.”

“Shut up.”

“When I found your book, I didn’t know the story, but I looked it up. And you told me yourself you love a dead girl. Those love notes? They’re to her, aren’t they?” She tries to keep her gaze leveled on him.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” Del takes a step towards her, and his eyes flash.

“Yikes!” She looks at Skylar. “I mean, it all made sense then—the book, his self-hate, the way he never talked about it.” She looks back at Del disdainfully. “Well, not ‘sense’ because you’re crazy.” She laughs.

Del takes another step towards Allison, but Skylar cuts between them.

“Uh, nice to meet you, Allison,” she says, then grabs Del’s hand and drags him towards the car.

Allison tosses out a venomous “Whatever,” flips her hair over her shoulder, and fades into a group of passers-by.

In the car Del and Skylar are both quiet. They’re both quiet when they get to Del’s house. He takes the dog out. She sits on the couch. She’s very quiet, very still. When he comes back in, he sits beside her.

They sit for a long time, each silent, each still.

Then Skylar begins wringing her hands. She says, “You want to tell me about her?”

“Allison? There’s nothing to tell.”

“No.” She pauses. “Tess.”

Del’s head pivots sharply.

Skylar sucks in her breath and then plunges ahead, “It can help you get over someone, if you just talk about it.”

He looks at her for a long time. She grabs his hand. “Tell me about her,” she says earnestly.

Del clears his throat, “I don’t…”

“Del. Please talk to me.”

He looks at her, and there are tears in her eyes. In those sincere, bottomless, brown eyes. *She could understand*, he thinks.

Del takes a deep breath. “I loved her,” he says, “from the moment I saw her. She was in this white dress. And she had a red ribbon in her hair.” He smiles at the memory. He relaxes.

Finally, he can talk about her. Finally, someone can help him bear the burden of loss. He keeps talking, and he keeps talking, and his eyes look somewhere Skylar can't see.

And Skylar, as she listens, begins to cry soundlessly.

One afternoon, we went to the library together. He wandered off towards nonfiction while I moseyed over to the racks of recent additions at the front.

I picked over a few titles, found a couple I thought I'd tackle, and I started to make my way back to circulation. As I turned the corner around the stacks, my breath caught in my throat. He was standing there at the desk, and my knees felt weak. He turned to look at me, and he smiled. I blushed and walked up to the desk.

"How can you look at me like that?" he asked.

I smiled at him confusedly, "Like what?"

"Like you're just about to talk to...I don't know...to your biggest crush."

I blushed again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I mean, I don't mind." He puffed up with exaggeration.

I smiled. "I guess I didn't expect to see you standing here."

"Well, I found the books I wanted, and then I figured I'd wait for you."

"You were waiting for me?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

I shook my head and looked back up at him in wonder.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure."

I checked out my books, and we held hands as we walked back to his car. I couldn't keep a smile off my face.

“When do you have to be back?” I asked.

“Back? Where?”

“At work.”

“Monday...just like you.” He looked at me sideways.

“So we can spend the whole weekend together?”

“Of course,” he said slowly. “Like we've been doing.”

I furrowed my brows. I wasn't sure what he meant. I didn't say anything the rest of the ride, and neither did he. We stopped in the driveway, but he didn't get out of the car so neither did I. I clutched my books like priceless souvenirs and beamed up at him.

He sighed, and after a long pause he said, “Sometimes I get the feeling that...you think I'm someone else.”

“I don't understand,” I said, tilting my head.

“It seems like...like you think I'm someone else. I don't know.”

“Like who?” I laughed.

“I don't know! It's just like you have someone else in mind when you look at me, when you're with me.” He was being serious.

“I only have eyes for you,” I said coyly.

“No. I know. That's apparent, but, I mean...” I started to kiss him. He sighed.

“I don't know what I mean...” And then he grabbed my wrists, and he held my hands in

front of him. “Sometimes I feel like I just need to say ‘It’s me.’” He looked at me steadily. He looked at me with cool, blue eyes. “‘It’s me, Ryan.’”

I blinked. And then I laughed, but it came out wrong. And I finally said, “I know,” in a voice that sounded too small.

Ryan sighed, kissed my cheek, and climbed out of the car.

I brushed my fingertips across the spot his lips had been and then followed him inside.

To her credit, Skylar tries. She tries for a long time to understand. But she gets worried because of the way he looks at her, because of the way more often he mentions people and places that don’t exist. She’s losing him. So she does what she can to save him. She loves him.

Del’s face is rigid. His knuckles are white. “I think you should go now,” he says flatly.

Skylar reaches for him, and he immediately backs away. Her hands fall limply to her sides. “Please, just listen to me. I just want what’s best for you.”

“I don’t need to see a psychiatrist.”

“He’s just a therapist. I’ll go too.”

“Why? Why do I need to go?” he demands.

“Del, there are just some things that don’t make sense.” Her eyes fill with tears. “There are some things I think you need to work out, and I don’t know how to help you. And I want you to be okay!”

“I am okay! I’ve never felt more okay!” And that’s what angers him—the betrayal.

“There’s nothing wrong with me. And I can’t believe you’d think...you’d think I’m crazy!”

"I don't think you're crazy. I think...I think you're dealing with a lot of stuff. And it can just help to talk to a therapist." Her eyes are pleading.

Del doesn't respond. She looks around the room, searching for the right argument. Finally she blurts, "Mark agrees with me."

"What?!" he roars. "You called my brother?"

She cowers, but the words have been said. "I was worried about you! And he's worried about you."

"Everyone needs to stop fucking worrying about me! I'm not some goddamn nut case!"

He swivels and storms outside, letting the door slam behind him.

Skylar slowly follows him. She stands in the doorway.

"Please don't shut me out," she murmurs.

He smoothes his face into a marble mask and turns to face her. He says, "I was wrong to get involved with you. I thought you were different. But you're not."

Skylar looks like she's been slapped. She steps forward. "Del, I...I love you."

Del doesn't answer, doesn't flinch.

She takes another step forward. "Do you hear me? I love you!"

"Don't," he says stonily. "Just don't."

Her face collapses. He knows he's hurting her. But she's hurt him. She doesn't understand. No one understands.

I felt terrible. I barely had the energy to pick my feet up. And my throat was always tight like every word was one syllable from a sob. I saw but didn't register

Gwen's disapproving pursed lips and Leah's worried frown. Everything came to me as through a thick pane of frosted glass.

I found myself hiding out in the bathroom at work again. Ryan was on a ski trip with some buddies, and it was harder for me to survive at work without him there.

The door to the bathroom opened. There was a pause, and then there was a light tapping on my stall door. I recognized Leah's shoes.

"Hey, it's Leah. You okay?" she said quietly.

"Yeah. Fine," I said. I was gripping my arms so tight that my nails were cutting into my skin. But I didn't mind.

"Look, I don't know what's going on, and you don't have to tell me, but I know there's something going on. You look and act exhausted but worse. And, well, here." She held a piece of paper under the door. "He's really good just to talk to. It helps so much just to talk...to anyone." I looked at the piece of paper—a doctor's name and phone number.

Her voice on the other end is strained. "I got a job. On the coast. I'm going to move next weekend. I just wanted to tell you in case..."

"In case what?" he asks.

"Nothing." She sighs. "Del, I meant what I said. I love you. I'll...I'll stay if you ask me, too."

He scoffs. "You can't turn down a job opportunity."

"There will be others. The job I have now isn't really that bad."

"You've been looking for months."

"I can keep looking for something here."

"Skylar—" He's tired.

"Please, just think for a minute. I know we had something. I know it! I knew it the first time we talked in the library! And remember the time we hid in Government Documents?"

Del is glad they're on the phone so she can't see the faint smile that crosses his lips.

He sighs heavily. "It's just not going to work."

She sniffs. "So this is goodbye."

"This is goodbye."

He didn't call. He was supposed to be back from his trip, but he didn't call. I tried his cell, and he didn't answer. I left messages that weren't returned. I called again the next day, and the next. I was furious. I was frantic. I even checked accident reports. Nothing.

So Monday I got ready for work, acid in my veins. I seethed when I saw his car in the parking lot, but I went straight to my desk and put on the pretense of working. I willed myself not to walk by his cubicle. Just before lunch, a message popped on my screen.

Can we go somewhere to talk?

What's there to talk about? I replied.

Please.

Fine. Meet you out front in twenty.

I spent that twenty minutes preparing all the things I wanted to say. I planned displays of anger, of reserve, of indifference. Anything but hurt or desperation.

We rode to the little restaurant in silence. I was afraid that if I talked first I would betray myself. We sat in a far corner with our trays of soup and sandwiches. Despite being at one of my favorite lunch spots, I wasn't feeling hungry. I swirled my spoon around the bowl, waiting.

"I'm sorry I didn't call, that I've...been ignoring you," he said.

I shrugged.

"I just....The time away gave me a chance to think, and I don't think I'm what you need right now."

I nodded.

"I thought maybe we could go back to the way things were and maybe even try this again a little later."

I let my spoon fall. "Fine," I said.

"Fine?"

"Fine. You're right. It was too soon. My mistake. It won't happen again."

"That's—" he started, then sighed. "Just give yourself some time."

"Right," I said. *You self-righteous asshole*, I wanted to scream. I forced a spoonful of potato soup in my mouth. *You're not what I need? I don't need anything!*

My lack of external reaction was troubling him, which gave me some satisfaction. I was a master of repression.

"Right," he said under his breath with a slight shake of his head.

The rest of the meal and the ride back to work were belabored by artificial small talk, and the afternoon hours dragged by. But I never broke.

It was sheer determination that got me up and into work for the rest of the week. I would not stay home. I would not let him think his little display of selflessness had had any impact. We generally avoided each other, and the only real repercussion of our “breakup” was that instead of a foursome for lunch, we paired off, guys and girls.

I was grateful that Leah didn’t ask any questions. Other than her referral in the bathroom, she hadn’t made any overt displays of concern. Instead, I just felt her watching me more, I heard her edited chatter.

So I made it to Friday. After work, I walked in my door, dumped everything I was carrying onto the floor, and sunk into the welcoming folds of my bed. I drifted in and out of a self-induced coma until Monday morning when my phone rang. It was after eleven, and Leah was calling to check on me. I told her I had the flu and wouldn’t be in for a few days. She seemed skeptical but at least satisfied that I was alive. I switched on the silent ring and receded back into the warmth and comfort of the covers.

And then I fell into nothingness.

He comes and lies down beside me. He smooths my hair, and my eyes flutter open. I smile.

“You’re here,” I say.

“I’m here.”

“I thought you left me.”

“No, I won’t leave.” He’s still caressing my hair and cheek. I turn my face so that my lips are pressed against his palm, and I breathe him in, then I turn back to look at him. I want to hold on to the image of his soft brown eyes, rumpled hair, and slow smile forever.

“I’ve been waiting for you for awhile,” I say.

“I know. But we’re here now.”

“Yes. We are.”

“You know it was always you all along.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” he laughs, and the sound wraps around my heart.

“What do we do now?”

“Whatever you want.”

So I slide over to him. My hand trembles a little as I reach out and lightly brush the hair on his arms. I move closer. I touch his collarbone, his neck, his jaw, his ear, his brow. I run a hand through his hair.

I can tell he’s watching me as I inspect him. And there’s just the faintest smile on his lips. At last, I bring my eyes to his. I move my face towards his by millimeters. I’m so close I can feel his breath on my lips. I pause for just an instant. *He’s real*, I say to myself. So I kiss him, and when our mouths touch, I know that if I could, I would crush him with my kiss. All I keep thinking is, *Finally. Finally.* Because nothing needs to make sense. We’re here. Together.

I'm lying in his arms, nestled against his neck. His fingers gently draw circles on my shoulder.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"A little," I say.

He kisses the top of my head and peels himself away from me. I watch him disappear into the hall. I resist the urge to race after him, but soon I hear the sound of cabinets opening in the kitchen.

I climb out of bed and go turn on the shower. I don't want to wash off the memory of his skin, but I can only imagine how I smell after days in bed. I'm thankful he didn't seem to mind. While the hot water pours over me, there's a tiny voice in the back of my head, but I silence it before I can listen to what it says. Instead, as I shave my legs, I relish the memory of his hand running up my leg. As I wash my neck and shoulders, I shiver with the memory of his kiss.

Suddenly, I wonder how long I've been taking. I hurriedly turn off the shower, towel off, wrap up in a robe, and head to the kitchen. I don't hear anything anymore. I feel anxious, but I stop before I turn the corner. I have to prepare myself for the worst. I take a deep breath and take the last few steps.

I feel silly. He's standing there, flipping through an old catalog on the counter. When he hears me, he looks up and smiles. He turns to the stove, and I see a grilled cheese in the skillet. He slides it onto a plate, and then pulls a bowl of Spaghetti O's out of the microwave.

“There wasn’t, uh, a lot to work with,” he says.

“This is perfect,” I say with a grin.

He takes a seat on the stool next to me and watches me as I eat.

“How—?” I start between mouthfuls. “How—”

“Did I get in? The door was unlocked. Tsk. Tsk.”

I shake my head. “How—”

He cuts me off again, “Do you want me to be here?”

“Of course,” I say.

“Then that’s all there is to it.”

I shrug and take another bite.

He glances behind me. “It’s beautiful outside. You should get out.”

“Okay,” I say. I’ll agree to anything he asks of me.

We spend the afternoon lounging on my patio. He reads aloud.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we-
Of many far wiser than we-
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling- my darling- my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

“I love that poem,” I say.

“Can ever dissever my soul from the soul,” he murmurs into my hair.

I snuggle closer. “That’s true love,” I say. “I hate the stories where everyone lives happily ever after. That’s not reality. Reality is pain, and when there’s still love after all that—that’s true love.”

“So what is that? Cynicism? Or just realism?” There’s a smile in his voice.

“Oh, I still think I’m a romantic. Just...an unhappy one. True love is...Cathy and Heathcliff or Edmund and Mercedes.”

“A lot of people would argue with you. Those couples—someone basically abandons the other one.”

“That happens though; someone gives up, and it’s the fight—whether it works or not—that is the real evidence of love. Because eventually the other person will know. They’ll both know. And sometimes it is too late.”

“Ah.”

“Like Tess and Angel,” I venture softly.

He doesn’t say anything. I crane my neck to look at his face. He’s staring out into the distance.

“That...that was something I can’t explain,” he says. “I don’t know how I got there.” He looks down at me. “But I’m here now. For you. I’m your Poe, your Heathcliff...your Angel.”

I smile up at him. “Yes, yes you are.”

I wake up slowly. There's a pounding somewhere, and it pulls me from my sleep. My eyelids are still heavy, but I sense that I'm alone. *Oh no*, I think. I look around frantically. I fly out of bed. I check every room. I'm alone. *Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no.*

There's a little slip of paper on the counter.

I'm not the one you need to save, it says.

I crush it in my hand. I stumble back to my room. I'm drowning. The room around me recedes. There's a rushing in my ears. The pounding has stopped. I smile because I can hear voices. I'm actually hearing voices. I sink to the floor, and an inky blackness greets me. Relief at last.

Del quits his job at the library. Perry acts miffed, but it's a sad day for Ruth, Maxine, and Judy. He tells them all he's finally decided to pursue a job that makes use of his degree. He fills them all with enough hope to quell their concerns about his ashen appearance, his apathy.

So they smile and send him off with well wishes. On his way home, Del stops by the liquor store. When he gets home, he takes care of the dog; then he gets good and drunk.

Down to the bottom of the bottle, eyes glassy, he suddenly staggers from the couch towards his room. He pauses in front of his dresser, steadying himself, then drops to his knees. He opens the bottom drawer. There he pulls out a book.

He leafs through the pages, reading parts, skipping around. He starts to cry. Not loudly or wetly, just a few shiny tears coursing down his cheeks. His shoulders begin to shake with deep, silent sobs, and the book falls from his hands. He lurches to his feet, a movement sudden enough that it makes his head spin. He wobbles, loses his balance, and careens towards the floor, clipping

the corner of his nightstand. Bursts of white shoot off in front of his eyes just before a heavy black curtain descends.

When I woke up again, it was to someone gently slapping my cheek. I moaned and struggled to turn away.

“Open your eyes. Come on. Open your eyes.”

I moaned again, and with a supreme effort forced my eyes open.

Leah’s face hovered over mine. I was confused. What was she doing here? Where was—? I sat up quickly, but the movement made my head churn.

“Whoa, take it easy. Everything’s okay.” She looked over her shoulder and said something to someone standing behind her. The other person left the room, and Leah turned her attention back to me.

“Sweetie, are you hurt?” I knew she was really asking if I’d hurt myself.

“No,” I said. My mouth was dry, and my tongue felt thick.

She sighed, relieved. “Okay. Let’s get you up and get you something to eat.”

“What—I’m fine. What...what are you doing here?”

“It’s Monday. You haven’t been to work, you don’t answer your phone, and I was worried that you...I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I told you I have the flu, and I’d be out a couple days.”

“That was two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks?” I whispered.

“Come on,” she said and slid an arm under me. We moved to the bathroom. She unhooked her arm to turn on the shower. I looked in the mirror. I sucked in my breath. I touched my cheek, and the reflection touched her cheek but there was no way that could be me—no way that that hollow, ashen, skeletal person was me.

Leah turned back around and saw my expression. “Yeah, you don’t look so good.” She frowned, but then added, “Don’t worry. You’re going to be okay.” She checked the temperature of the water. “You’ll be okay by yourself? I’ll wait on the couch.”

I nodded mechanically. She left. I undressed and stepped into the stream of hot water. I turned up the heat until it was practically scalding my skin. It felt good. Feeling anything felt good. Afterwards, walking back into my room, I paused. I looked at the drawn shades, the clothes, books, and papers scattering the floor. I looked at my big, empty bed, covers turned back only on one side. I began to cry. I was still crying when Leah came back and found me sitting on the floor pressed against my bed.

She crouched next to me and hugged me. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay,” she cooed.

“What’s wrong with me?” I sobbed.

She sighed. “I don’t know,” she said honestly, “but you’re going to be okay.”

After a few minutes, I quieted myself a little. I sniffed and mumbled, “I’m so embarrassed.”

She laughed a little. “Better me and Bill than some strangers.”

“Bill?”

“Yeah. I called him when I couldn’t get a hold of you. He still had a key.”

I nodded. That made sense. And at least something did. “He’s here?”

“Uhm....yes...He didn’t want to bother you; he’s in the living room; he said he’d understand if you wanted him to leave. He was just waiting to make sure you’re okay.”

“Could you—could you tell him ‘thank you’ for me? And ‘I’m sorry’? I don’t think I’m ready to see him yet.”

Leah nodded. “Okay. You put some clothes on,” she said, rising, “and we’ll order a pizza. That sound good?”

I managed a smile. “That sounds great.” She headed for the door. “Leah?” I called after her. She turned. “Thank you.”

She smiled. “No problem.”

A couple months later, my doorbell rang, and I was nervous as I went to answer it. I was actually a little afraid. But when I opened the door and I saw that easy smile, I suddenly felt more relaxed than I had in a long time. And as we sat eating dinner across from each other, I felt more like myself than I had in an even longer time.

“You look good,” he told me.

“I feel good,” I said. I moved some spaghetti across my plate. And then said, “I’ve been seeing a therapist. Leah recommended him. He’s pretty good.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve talked about you,” I said, and smiled.

He smiled back. “Really? Hmmm. Is that good?”

I nodded. “Yes.” I paused for a moment and then looked up. “It’s been...enlightening.”

He looked at me curiously. I blushed.

And while we talked he didn’t tell me what I should have done. He didn’t tell me how I could fix things. He didn’t say anything. He just listened. So when we finished dinner, I asked him to stay for a while. And he did. He sat down on the couch, and he didn’t hide his surprise when I curled up next to him. Between the steady rise and fall of his chest and the drone of the TV, I was lulled into contentment, into a sense of right.

When it got late, he gently lifted me up and slid off the couch. Part of me wanted to ask him to stay, but it wasn’t the right time yet. We lingered at the door.

“I wanted to tell you I’m sorry,” I said.

He looked at me, eyes a little pained. “I’m really, really sorry,” I repeated.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I know,” he said.

“That wasn’t me at the end there. I’m not that person anymore.”

He smiled. “I know,” he said again.

“You think we could do this again sometime soon?”

“I’d really like that.”

And then I couldn’t help asking, “You still want me?”

He sighed. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted. All I’ll ever want.”

And then he leaned down and kissed me, and true happiness—true love—flooded my foolish heart.

EPILOGUE

When Del comes to, he groans. His head is being hammered with pain. His leaded eyelids slowly open but immediately close against the bright glare of sunlight. There is something tickling his arm, and Del's senses gradually awaken. He brings a heavy arm up to shield his eyes and cautiously opens them again. Above him the blue sky stretches. He lifts his head, with much protest from his skull, and then props himself onto an elbow. He's outside, lying in the grass. Del knows he should be alarmed, but the pain has clouded rational thought.

He unsteadily gets to his feet, where he's better able to survey his surroundings. He is in the midst of rolling countryside, and just over a hill, a thin trail of smoke curls into the air. He heads toward it.

As he crests the hill, a small town and the outer-lying meadow sprawl before him. And then Del knows he must be dreaming because there, in the meadow, is a band of women dancing, dressed in white, and one—one has a red ribbon in her hair.

Tears glisten in his eyes, and a hand goes to his mouth. But he smiles. He smiles and starts to walk towards his resurrected love.

And this time, he promises himself, it will be forever.